

Vietnam and India: A Discourse on Buddhist Contacts

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Abstract: India and Southeast Asia are two important regions of Asia. Both have played meaningful roles in history through cultural contacts and trading relationship. There have been profound changes in religion, society and economy of the regions due to trans-national migration and cross-cultural movements. The Indian cultural influence in Southeast Asia forms a fascinating aspect of India-Southeast Asia relations. The dynamics of Southeast Asian culture resulted in a meaningful pattern of diachronic interaction between India and Southeast Asia. Maritime commercial network in Asia unleashed a cultural process resulting in introduction of Buddhism into Vietnam. The discovery of items like shouldered adzes, knobbed ware, glass beads etc from different sites in India and Vietnam point to the relations between the two regions in pre-historic times. There was also commercial relationship between India and Vietnam in early times. Along the Asian sea route, trade and commerce increased during the first two centuries of Common Era. The northern Vietnam under Chinese rule became a centre of Buddhist learning, as it was a convenient halting place for pilgrims and missionaries on their journey between India and China. There was coming of Buddhist monks to Tonking region. At the end of third century, Marajivaka went from India to Tonking. In the seventh century, the Vietnamese monks such as Moksadeva, Khuy Sung and Hue Diem went on pilgrimages to different places. There were twelve Vietnamese names in the list of Buddhist scholars prepared by the Chinese traveler I. Ching. One of the important aspects of Vietnamese Buddhism was that there was no attempt to integrate Hindu Gods. It was associated with Confucianist and Taoist traditions. In the southern kingdom of Campa, there was prevalence of the closely related Theravadin sect, *aryasammitiyanikaya* as had been noted by I. Ching. Buddha images of Amaravati style pertaining to early centuries of Common Era have been found from Dong-duong near Danang in central Vietnam. An inscription of the same region describes the installation of a Buddha image in 875 C.E. and construction

of a Buddhist temple and monastery by Indravarman II. In the present article, an attempt has been made to delineate Buddhist contacts between India and Vietnam. The article would contest the Indic centric view that there was total transplantation of Indian Buddhism. The theoretical premise would be that the whole process of Indian cultural influence was interaction between culture of India and Vietnam. It was the genius of Vietnamese, which choose those elements of an external culture that were either consistent with or could be moulded to its own beliefs.

India and Southeast Asia are two important regions of Asia. Both have played meaningful roles in history through cultural contacts and trading relationship. There have been profound changes in religion, society and economy of both the regions due to trans-national migration and cross-cultural movements. The Indian cultural influence in Southeast Asia forms a fascinating aspect of India-Southeast Asia relations. The dynamics of Southeast Asian culture resulted in a meaningful pattern of diachronic interaction between India and Southeast Asia. Maritime commercial network in Asia unleashed a cultural process resulting in introduction of Buddhism into Vietnam.

In the present article, an attempt has been made to delineate Buddhist contacts between India and Vietnam in ancient times. The article would contest the Indic centric view that there was total transplantation of Indian Buddhism. Glorification of India's past dominated the Indian historical writing of nationalist historians and they visualized Southeast Asian culture as the gift of India. This trend even spilled over in post colonial period for quite a sometime. Only in the recent past, Indian historians have taken a fresh approach to the subject and a subtle change is visible in their approach. They have highlighted the developed base of the autochthonous societies of Southeast Asia. The theoretical premise would be that the whole process of Indian cultural influence was interaction between culture of India and Vietnam. It was the genius of Vietnamese, which choose those elements of an external culture that were either consistent with or could be moulded to its own beliefs. The process of Indian cultural influence in Southeast Asia has been termed conveniently as, Indianization¹ and it would be not out of place to discuss the concept as Indian impact in Vietnam is a component of it.

I

Indianization is the term generally used for Indian cultural influence upon Southeast Asia. Absence of concrete evidences regarding this complex process of Indian cultural impact has resulted in postulating various theories regarding motives and process of Indianization. The Indian cultural influence was by peaceful and non-political methods.² The use of term Indianization has been criticized because "it may suggest a conscious effort on the part of Indians to spread their culture over major parts of

1 For details see, Patit Paban Mishra, *A Discourse on Indo-Southeast Asian Relations: Prejudices, Problems and Perception*. Presidential address, Section IV, 65th Session, Indian History Congress, Bareilly, 28-30 December 2004.

2 Patit Paban Mishra, "Contact between Orissa and South East Asia in Ancient Times" *Journal of Orissan History*, Vo.I, no. 2, 1980, p. 16.

Southeast Asia”.³ Some western scholars have preferred the term classical and the terms like Indic and Indianization had been discarded. In spite of objection in certain quarters regarding the use of the term Indianization, it has been retained in the present article for study of Indian cultural influence. This has been used in a broader context with due emphasis on Southeast Asian initiative or indigenization.

Various theories regarding motives and process of Indianization have been postulated. The *ksatriya* (warrior class) theory which presupposes that the Indian cultural expansion was due to the seminal influence of the Indian warriors and conquerors, who migrated in large numbers to Southeast Asia. The *vaisya* (merchant class) theory argues that Indian cultural penetration began with traders, who intermarried with local women and impressed the indigenous population with their goods and culture. The Suvarnadwipa or island of gold allured the commercial enterprise of Indians. The third theory propounded by J.C. van Leur⁴, which is commonly known as *brahmana* theory accorded primacy to local initiative: indigenous port patricians and rulers enlisted the service of brahmins to buttress their political authority through Hindu ceremonies and rituals. The *brahmana* theory discarded the Indian influence as the sole reason for Southeast Asian cultural development. It greatly changed the Indian historical writing on Southeast Asia also in the last three decades. All the three hypotheses narrated above contain some amount of historical truth. The whole process of Indianization was outcome of endeavour of warriors, traders and priests along with the indigenous initiative. Most probably all the three categories of people were involved in the process. Quite often; *ksatriya*, *vaisya* and *brahmana* were not distinct in the Southeast Asian context. A *ksatriya* might be a trader or a *vaisya* might indulge in power struggle of the court. All these classes of people also might have sought local assistance to serve their interests and the latter in turn would have desired support of the influential Indians.

It would be not, out of place to discuss how the Indian culture, which is not one organic unit but composed of different traditions spread in India itself. If Indianization of Southeast Asia was an extension of Aryanization within India, there might be some similarities between the way Indian culture spread in Southeast Asia with the same process it advanced in different parts of India. Indian culture consists of plurality of traditions, which evolved out of interaction between Sanskrit culture and vernacular lore of dominant groups. Max Weber⁵ in his study of religions of India has presented the scenario of Hinduism spreading to different parts of India, from the core region of Aryavarta under the Guptas. The ruling groups of the tribes were initiated to particular Hindu customs through ‘extensive’ Hinduization of tribal areas. The *brahmins* gave the tribal rulers testimony that they were of *ksatriya* blood. By this process of legitimization, the rulers were integrated into Hindu society as the legitimate King and became the master of subject classes. The two ways process between Sanskrit

3 J.G. de Casparis and I.W. Mabbett, “Religion and Popular Beliefs of Southeast Asia before c.1500,” in N. Tarling, ed, *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*, Vol.I, Singapore, 1992, p. 281.

4 J.C. van Leur, *Indonesian Trade and Society*. The Hague, 1955. pp 95 ff.

5 .D. Kantowsky ed, *Recent Researches on Max Weber’s Studies of Hinduism*. London, 1984, pp. 104 ff.

culture and the outlying group involving initial contact as well as permeation of that culture resulted in upward social mobility. This Sanskritization process⁶ was not only confined to Hindu castes but also to the tribals undergoing this process.

II

The archaeological discoveries in Southeast Asian countries like Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, Cambodia, Laos etc brought into light a well-developed culture before it came into contact with either China or India. It had established beyond doubt that Indian influence began to permeate into the developed material societies of the region well Before Common Era (B.C.E.). Vietnam possesses a rich pre-historical cultural heritage. The dominant industry from about thirteen thousand years ago until the arrival of agriculture in mainland Southeast Asia is known as Hoabinhian after discovery in the former Hoa Binh (presently Ha Son Binh) province of Vietnam.⁷ The archaeological findings of the 1920s have made famous the Hoabinhian culture that covered the mainland Southeast Asia from Myanmar and southern China southwards to Malaysia. The main traits of foraging community were frequent use of rock shelters and a distinctive pattern of food remains. In Hang Goan, the bronze finds are dated to about the end of the third millennium B.C.E. The excavations at Dong-son in Thanh Hoa province prove the level of culture attended by Vietnam before the impact of Sino-Indian influences. The Dong-Sonian culture arrived in Vietnam around 600 B.C.E. The Dongsonian people were also excellent navigators. While the northern Viet tribes were greatly influenced by the Chinese, the southern Viets remained ethnically and culturally distinct from their occupiers. Apart from the knowledge of metallurgy, the Dongson people also had their farming based on irrigation cultivation. The sites at Viet Khe, Lang Ca and Lang Vac have yielded bronze implements like miniature drums and bells, bowl and situlae, bracelets, belt looks and daggers with hilts resembling human figures in the round.

From the third century B.C.E., cultural interaction between China and Vietnam began. Pottery from Dongson sites had close parallel with geometric paddle-impressed pottery of South China. The non-Chinese people residing in southern China were the Yuen or Viet, who were ancestors of the Vietnamese. They gradually moved southwards to the Hong (Red) river delta, which became the focal point of Vietnamese civilization. Under Han rule, most of Vietnam came under Chinese influence. The Chinese emperor Wu-ti conquered the region in 111 B.C.E. Vietnam under the Chinese domination included northern portion of Vietnam. While the northern Viet tribes were greatly influenced by the Chinese, the southern Viets remained ethnically and culturally distinct from their occupiers. The Vietnamese people never acquiesced to the Chinese rule and there were constant uprisings. The gaining of independence after nearly one thousand years of Chinese rule came in 939 C.E. Dai Viet gradually became a strong and well-organized country. The Vietnamese began to expand southwards by putting pressure on Campa.

6 M.N. Srinivas, *Social Change in Modern India*. New Delhi, 1972.

7 For details see, *Vietnam Studies* (Hanoi), 48, 1978; C.F. Gorman, "Hoabinhian: a Pebble tool complex with early plant association in Southeast Asia", *Science* 1969, CLXIII, pp. 671ff. and N.K.Vien, *Traditional Vietnam: Some Historical Stages*, Hanoi, n.d., pp. 10ff.

The people of Campa known as Chams are ethno-linguistically Malay. Speaking Austronesian language, they inhabit the eastern coast of central and southern Vietnam. At its maximum territorial extent, it covered the central coast from Hoanh Son in the north to Phan Thiet in the south. The Chams resisted the Vietnamese advance to the south and were ultimately absorbed by them. The state of Campa or Lin-Yi came into existence in 192 C.E. by Sri Mara, whose territory corresponded with Quang Binh, Quang Tri and Thua Thien provinces. The loss of control of southern border by the Han Empire gave Campa an opportunity to extend southwards. Diplomatic missions were being sent to the Chinese governor of Tonking region. In the middle of fourth century C.E., the Funanese province of Panduranga was annexed. The Chams were greatly influenced by Buddhist-Hindu culture of India. Their move northwards against Chinese controlled Tonking region failed and the Chams looked southward. In the middle of sixth century C.E., they occupied the lower Annamese coast. One of the features of Campa's history was invasion by the Chinese, Khmers and Vietnamese. In 910 C.E. there was a Khmer invasion. The Vietnamese sacked the Cham capital Vijaya twice in eleventh century C.E. Finally in 1471, a Vietnamese army seized the capital Vijaya and incorporated the area north to the southern boundary of Binh Dinh province. The southernmost Cham principalities became vassal states of the Vietnamese and the Cham kings ruled in the Panduranga region in the province of Thuan Hai until 1832. The Vietnamese in their march to the south (nam tien) against the Chams absorbed several elements of Cham culture like music, dance and sculpture.

Along the Asian sea route, trade and commerce increased during the first two centuries of Common Era. A commercial relationship developed between Vietnam and India. One of the trade routes between India and China passed through the coasts of central and southern Vietnam. The Indian traders arriving on the Malay coast were crossing the Gulf of Siam to reach the port of Oc eo in South Vietnam near the Cambodian border. The voyage then covered the coast post Campa to Chio-Chii port in Vietnam or on to Canton in China. Situated at a junction of canals linking the Gulf of Siam with the main channels of Mekong, the port of Oc eo was an entrepot from second to sixth centuries C.E. ⁸ The particular location of the port was suitable for sailors offering protection from troubled sea and they had to stay for sometime to wait for shifting of winds blowing towards the continent. So, cultural interaction between local people and sailors coming from India must have developed. Oc eo has yielded beads, seals with Sanskrit inscriptions, gold medallions and rare piece of statuary. A standardized metal currency in the region was being used by sixth century C.E. and *srivatsa* coin became the prototype for coins of mainland Southeast Asia for a period of more than five hundred years.⁹ The Chams were actively participating in the maritime trade and their items of export were camphor, sandalwood, porcelain ware, lead and tin.

8 K.W. Taylor, "The Early Kingdoms" in N. Tarling, n.3. p.158.

9 H.P. Ray, "Early Maritime Contacts Between South and Southeast Asia", in H.P. Ray and Jean-François eds, *Tradition and Archaeology, Early Maritime Contacts in the Indian Ocean*. New Delhi, 1998, p. 52. The *srivatsa* motif appeared for the first time in the Hathigumpha inscription of Kharavela, a King of Orissa.

III

Along with commercial relationship, there was religious rapprochement between people of Vietnam and India, which was reflected in art, architecture, literature and social life. The social, cultural and religious institutions of political centres like Vijaya (Binh-dinh), Kauthara (Nha-trang) and Panduranga (Phanrang) were deeply affected by elements of Hinduism. One of the important aspects of Vietnamese Buddhism was that there was no attempt to integrate Hindu Gods and Goddesses generally, which was quite common in Thailand, Cambodia and Laos. It was more associated with Confucianist and Taoist traditions. The history of Buddhism in Vietnam was closely interlinked with developments of that religion India, China, Cambodia and Sri Lanka. Arising in India in sixth century B.C.E., Buddhism spread far and wide. The Buddhist missionaries and traders played important role in disseminating the message of Buddha. The origin of Vietnamese Buddhism with its long history of more than 2300 years could be traced to the third century B.C.E., when the Mauryan Emperor Asoka (273-236 B.C.E) deputed missionaries propagate the doctrine of Buddhism. After the third Buddhist Council held in Pataliputra under the patronage of Asoka and Presidentship of Mogaliputta Tissa, nine groups of Buddhist missionaries were sent from India.¹⁰ One such group arrived in Gia Chau (Bac Ninh province) in North Vietnam.¹¹ The doctrinal schism within the Buddhist Samgha in India influenced the history of Buddhism throughout Asia. Held under the auspices of Kushan ruler Kaniska I (reigned 78- 103 C.E.), the Fourth Buddhist Council (100 C.E.) convened in Kashmir, resulted in parting of ways between Hinayana and Mahayana sects. The Mahayana sect became more popular because its liberal interpretation of Buddhist doctrines than the orthodox ones of Hinayans or Theravadins.

IV

Around first century of Common Era, the important Buddhist centre Luy Lau had been established. It was the capital of Giao Chau, a vassal state of the Han rulers. From Gia Chau, Buddhism spread to different parts of north Vietnam. Situated between the main trade route between India and China, Luy Lau became an important resting place for Indian traders and Buddhist missionaries before their journey northwards to South China and the Yangtse River Valley. In fact, gradually many parts of north Vietnam became centres of Buddhist learning as it was a convenient halting place for pilgrims and missionaries on their journey between India and China. There was frequent visit of Buddhist monks to Tonking region. At the end of third century C. E., Marajivaka went from India to Tonking. In Luy Lau, Kalaruci (Tche Kiang Liang) from India and Mao Po (Mui Tsu) from China were prominent Buddhist monks as well as scholars.¹² The Giao Chau capital boasted of twenty Buddhist shrines and five hundred monks. The

10 W. Geiger, ed *Mahavamsa*. London, 1908, p.82. Asoka's Rock Edicts V and XIII also mentioned the names of Theras and places, where he sent the missionaries.

11 Thich Minh Chau, A brief history of Vietnamese Buddhism, Available at, <http://www.buddhismtoday.com/english/vietnam/country/003-buddhism%20in%20VN.htm> [downloaded on May 1, 2008].

12 *Ibid.* Chau also mentions that the *Buddha's Sutta in 42 Sections* of around second century C.E. was one of the first *Suttas* translated into Chinese.

Buddhist scholars undertook the task of translating fifteen Buddhist scriptures. K'ang Seng Hui was the first Buddhist Master of Vietnam, who joined the Order of Monks.¹³ He had been credited with building a pagoda in Nanking and propagating Buddhism. The most ancient compendium of Buddhist literary texts of Vietnam, *Thien Uyen Tap Anh* (Anthology of the Most Talented Figures in Ch'an Park) had mentioned about life of this famous monk. The Mahayana Buddhism was referred in Vietnam as Dai Thua or Bac Tong, which means coming 'from the north' or from China. The Theravada Buddhism practised in the Mekong Delta region was known by nomenclature, Tieu Thua or Nam Tong, meaning its advent 'from the south' or India. According to popular notion, the two main types of Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism and Theravada came respectively from China and India. The former reached Red River Delta area second century C.E. the latter spread in between third and fourth centuries C.E. in the Mekong delta region. But, this was not so. India had a major role in expansion of both the types, although in northern Vietnam Chinese influence persisted. Mahayana Buddhism became popular and became the most prevalent religion in Vietnam afterwards.

As Buddhism progressed in Vietnam, there were frequent visits by the Vietnamese scholars and monks to different places including India. In the seventh century C.E, the monks from Vietnam such as Moksadeva, Khuy Sung and Hue Diem went on pilgrimages to different places.¹⁴ There were twelve Vietnamese names in the list of Buddhist scholars prepared by the Chinese traveler I. Ching.¹⁵ The Indian Buddhist missionaries also were spreading Mahayana Buddhism in places like China, Nepal, Tibet, Iran, Japan, Malaya peninsula, Java, Borneo, Sumatra, north Vietnam and Campa. Although Campa absorbed mainly Brahmic elements from India, there was impact of Buddhism also. In fact contact between the Chams and people of eastern coast of India dated to the times of Mahavira. The Jaina *Uttaradhyayana Sutra* mentioned that the Chams were visiting the port of Pithunda of Kalinga for religious and commercial purpose. As per a legend, a merchant from Campa named Palita got married to a local woman of Kalinga and while returning to Campa in a ship, his wife gave birth to a son named Samudrapala.¹⁶ Relationship between Kalings and Campa from the second century C.E. onwards had been mentioned in the same Jaina text. The capital of Kalinga in the second half the fourth century C.E. was Simhapura. The same place name Simhapura was capital of Campa for sometime. I. Ching had mentioned that there was prevalence of closely related Theravadinns sect, Aryasammitiyanikaya in the kingdom of Campa.¹⁷

Campa occupied a significant role in trading route between the West to the East, which was known as know as 'silk road of the sea'. The port cities of the kingdom were resting places of Buddhist pilgrims and monks at the time of monsoon. There was gradual spread of Mahayana Buddhism in between eight and tenth centuries in the kingdom of

13 *Ibid.*

14 J.G. De Casparis and I.W. Mabbett, "Religion and Popular Beliefs of Southeast Asia before c 1500" in N. Tarling, ed, n.3, p. 293.

15 J.F. Cady. *Southeast Asia: Its Historical Development*. New Delhi, 1976, p. 104.

16 N.K. Sahu, Odiya *Jatira Itihas*, Vol. I, in Oriya. Bhubaneswar, 1977. p. 385.

17 H.A. Giles, ed, *A Record of Buddhist Kingdoms*. London, 1962. p. XXIV.

Campa. Along the coast of central Vietnam, ruins of some Buddhist temple-towers are still extant. During the Vietnam War, the American bombing had obliterated some fine monuments and art pieces. Indravarman II (reigned 875-889 C.E.) was the first Cham ruler to embrace Mahayana Buddhism and declare it as the state religion. Taking a leaf from Indian kings tracing a lineage from famous sages, he proclaimed himself as the descendant of Bhrigu. The achievements of this sage were described in detail in the ancient classic of India, the *Mahabharata*. Indravarman II named the new capital as Indrapura (Dong Duong in Quang Nam Province of modern Vietnam) claiming that it was founded by Bhrigu himself. Thus, he legitimized his rule by claiming genealogy from famous personalities of earlier times. There were remarkable Buddhist sculptural and architectural achievements during his reign period. An inscription of the year 875 C.E. described the installation of a Buddha image in 875 C.E. and construction of a Buddhist temple and monastery in honor of bodhisattva Lokeshvara by Indravarman II.¹⁸ In the same year, an exquisite bronze statue of Laksmindra-Lokeshvara was carved.¹⁹ Sculptures of *dvarapalas* (guards) dotted round the monastery. The Dong Duong style was characterized by realism depicting life and style of the Chams. Buddha images of Amaravati style pertaining to early centuries of Common Era had been found from Dong-duong near Danang in central Vietnam. Buddhism as the faith of the state declined after a half century with the restoration earlier prevalent Saivite sect of Hinduism.

The characteristic features of Vietnamese Buddhism in pre-Medieval period were advent of Indian traders, monks and pilgrims to Gia Chau region. Afterwards it spread to China. The Hinayana doctrine predominated, which was supplemented and sometimes replaced by the Mahayana faith. The Vietnamese Buddhism progressed considerably, which were reflected in art, architecture, literature, social norms and festivals. Buddhism spread in Vietnam as a result of interaction between indigenous and imported cultures from India. The age old contact between the two regions became one of the important contributory factors in forging a new relationship, which survived in colonial period as well as contemporary times. Even at the height of the Vietnam War, India stood solidly behind the Vietnamese people. From the days of Lord Buddha himself, Vietnam and India had forged a bond of deep relationship. Buddhism had played a meaningful role in contact between the two regions down the centuries.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Tran Ky Phuong, The geography of the ancient kingdom of Champa in Central Vietnam, Vietnam, Available at <http://pnclink.org/annual/annual2003/programme/presenpdf/110931.pdf> [downloaded on April 30, 2003].

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